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INFANT BAPTISM.



INFANT BAPTISM

ITS NATURE AND OBJECTS.

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PREFACE.

THIS Tract was drawn up by the appointment of the Free Presbytery of Arbroath ; and having been read as a Presbyterial exercise at their last meeting, it is now, in a slightly extended form, published at their request.

The object was simply to provide a statement which might aid parents in understanding the nature and obligations of Baptism, and thus contribute to their acceptable and profitable observance of the sacrament when administered to their children.

July 18, 1856.





INFANT BAPTISM.

THE questions regarding the *mode* and *subjects* of BAPTISM, though the more ordinary and prominent, are not the only ones which the discussion of this topic involves. Even after these are settled, there remains the not less important inquiry, What is the use or meaning of Baptism, especially of Infant Baptism? What good purpose does it serve? What spiritual benefit does it confer? This inquiry may be regarded as raised by a controversialist, or as proceeding from a humble, anxious believer. In either case, it deserves to be entertained, and plainly needs to be satisfied—on the one hand, in order to obviate an objection which is often and not unsuccessfully urged; on the other hand, in order to promote an intelligent observance and comfortable improvement of the ordinance. Assuming, then, that infants are proper subjects of baptism, and that the pouring or sprinkling of water is a

lawful and scriptural mode of its administration, let us endeavour to trace, with reference to the meaning and efficacy of Infant Baptism, the analogy to the Lord's Supper, which their common sacramental nature implies, and to determine for it a character intermediate between the idea of mere symbolism, and the Romish doctrine of sacramental grace.

The commonly received doctrine of the Reformed Churches, as to the nature and object of baptism, is concisely and comprehensively stated in our Shorter Catechism :—" Baptism is a sacrament wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth *signify* and *seal* our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's." This definition, put into the mouth of a believer, is evidently intended to include infant baptism; and we will best attain the end of our present investigation, by examining the place which is here assigned to it, by inquiring to what extent, or in what sense, the representation here given of this ordinance as a *sign* and *seal* harmonises with the view which Scripture warrants us to take of baptism as administered to infants.

1. Let us first inquire whether baptism is a SIGN, and if so, of what truths infant baptism is significant.

None but a very cursory observer will receive, even at first sight, the impression that baptism, as exhibited in the New Testament, is merely a badge

of Christian profession, the initiatory rite by which the transition from Judaism or heathenism to Christianity, or the assumption of the Christian name, is externally recognised. The very fact that baptism has supplied many figurative expressions, in which the sacred writers have embodied the deepest spiritual truths, is enough to shew that it is not a mere arbitrary ceremony, having no symbolical fitness in itself, but dependent for all its significance on the words by which its celebration is accompanied. It evidently has a natural resemblance to these Gospel verities; and that it should have been instituted expressly in order to represent them, or picture them forth to our eyes, is in entire harmony with God's mode of teaching his Church in preceding dispensations. No sooner was the covenant of grace proclaimed in the hearing of our first parents, than God added, in the rite of sacrifice, a symbolical explanation of the promise of the woman's seed. And whatever else the various sacrifices of the temple service were, they were at least signs—scenic or pictorial representations, of the doctrine of pardon and reconciliation through a Saviour's death, and they were designed to illustrate and interpret the frequent but necessarily dim statements in which it had been announced, and thus to convey to the mind some more distinct idea of its principle or outline than could be communicated by the shadowy language of promise and prophecy alone. Every

one who considers how greatly the understanding of a verbal description is helped by pictures, how much more vivid the impression which the eye can take in at a glance, than what the ear can transmit from even the most accurate language, will discern the wisdom and condescension of God in thus accommodating his plan of teaching heavenly things to this characteristic of our mental constitution.

The clear and full disclosure of the plan of mercy in the light of the Gospel day, has diminished—it might be thought to have superseded—the necessity of the Church's dependence on symbolic institutes for her knowledge of Divine truth. But though the elaborate and complex system of the Old Testament ritual has been utterly swept away, God has seen it meet still to have respect to the weakness of our perception, and has not altogether discarded the use of visible and significant elements as aids in our spiritual instruction. He has appointed in the New Testament Church two ordinances, which, though contrasted with the Levitical ceremonies in their simplicity, as well as in the fewness of their number, yet have this in common, that they consist in the ritual use of visible material elements. One of these is admitted to be of the same nature as the Levitical observances—in so far as they were signs of Divine truths. Can we imagine that the other has no such design or function—that it stands alone amidst all the apparently similar ordinances which God, throughout the history of His Church,

has instituted, its earthly elements having no Divine signification, uttering no voice of heavenly instruction? In the Lord's Supper—which consists in the “giving and receiving of bread and wine,” we have “Christ's death shewed forth”—we have set before us, in expressive element and action, Christ incarnate, Christ crucified, Christ crucified the entire nourishment of his people, Christ crucified becoming the nourishment of each individual soul, as he is given to that soul by God, in his being received by faith, and through that closest union with each believer which faith effects. What fulness of Gospel truth regarding the life of the believer, and under what unexampled simplicity of outward form! And if so much of Gospel truth regarding the source and mode of a believer's nourishment is portrayed in this ordinance, may we not suppose that the whole remainder of the sum and substance of the Gospel truth—viz., how a sinner can become a believer and a partaker of the heritage of Christ's people—is represented in the other? and that thus, under these two simple ordinances, there is comprehended the doctrine of the grace of Christ—not less fully than in all the various, and costly, and arduous observances of the former economy?

In order to ascertain of what spiritual realities baptism is significant, we must inquire what light Scripture casts upon the meaning of each of its two parts, the *element* and the *action*.

1. The *sacramental element*, or “sensible sign,” is WATER. As applied outwardly to the body, water conveys the idea of cleansing, and thus must here be understood as representing the agent of spiritual purifying. But the blood of Christ cleanses the soul from guilt, and the Holy Spirit washes away sin’s moral pollution; and, therefore, it is very commonly said that the water in baptism signifies both. It is very true, that these are never disjoined in the actual application of the blessings of the covenant of grace; that when we speak of or represent the one, we cannot forget the presence of the other; that the blood of Christ may be regarded as comprehensive of the gift of the Spirit, as its purchase and consequence; and that the gift of the Spirit must always be viewed as implying the virtue and the spirituality of Christ’s blood as its source. But still, though these are inseparable and mutually dependent, yet they are distinct parts of the great salvation, having separate and distinguishable results. And it may be submitted whether a more accurate and careful interpretation would not regard the sign, however much it inferentially implied, as properly and directly signifying only one of these two—and that one the Holy Spirit. For—

(1.) To regard the one sign, *water*, as equally, primarily, and at the same time denoting two separate things, seems at variance with that simplicity and distinctness which ought to characterise symbols even more than language. There are not

awaiting instances, indeed, throughout the Jewish ritual, in which one type had a twofold primary signification, as, for example, the Holy of Holies, which is spoken of both as a figure of Heaven (Heb. ix. 7, 12, 24), and also as a figure of the human body of Jesus in which the Deity was enshrined (Heb. x. 20; John ii. 21); but then, it is not to be taken in these two senses at one and the same time, or when looked on from one point of view. These two distinct significations are connected with two equally distinct lines of interpretation running through the whole series of related symbols. It is questionable whether there is any instance, in the complicated system of Old Testament types, in which two separate things are simultaneously figured forth in one act or emblem, and no separate results exhibited as corresponding to each of them. This were not complexity, but confusion. It was rather customary to employ several earthly things as similitudes of one heavenly thing, than to find one of the things of earth adequate to represent more than one spiritual reality.

(2.) In the figurative language of Scripture, *water* is a frequent emblem of the Holy Spirit. There are those numerous passages in which, as the means of allaying thirst, or of quickening the processes of vegetation (such as Isa. xlv. 3, 4; Ps. lxxii. 6; John vii. 37-39), water is introduced to represent the Spirit's refreshing, reviving, invigorating grace. There are also other passages in which the figure

of “pouring out,” used to express God’s dispensation of the Spirit, seems to be borrowed from the manner of the application of water which was most familiar to the notice of the Jew (such as Zech. xii. 10; Ezek. xxxix. 29; Prov. i. 23; Joel ii. 28; Isa. xxxii. 15).* Apart from these, however, we have three texts in the New Testament which afford a manifest illustration of the water in baptism, as suggested by its being used for the washing of the person. In Eph. v. 26, it is said, “Christ loved the Church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word;” where the washing with water evidently means nothing else than the operation of the Holy Spirit in sanctification or spiritual cleansing. In Titus iii. 5, we read of being saved “by the *washing* of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost,” and in John iii. 5, of being “born of *water* and the Spirit.” It is not necessary to suppose that in these two passages baptism is denoted, or even alluded to.† The same idea—the

* Unless, indeed, it should be supposed that in any of these instances the reference is to the pouring out of the anointing oil. It is worthy of notice, especially if *pouring* be regarded as the proper mode of using the water in baptism, that while this expression often describes the bestowal of the Spirit, we nowhere find it employed to describe the *application* of Christ’s blood to the believer.

† Dr Halley of Manchester, in his work on the *Sacraments*, while advocating very low views of the nature and design of these ordinances, singularly enough contends that baptism is the thing actually meant by the “washing of regeneration” in one of these texts, and the being “born of water” in the other. His reasoning in support of this opinion is very unsatisfactory and inadequate. He argues with

purifying virtue of water in ordinary life—suggested the use of this element equally in the figurative ordinance and the figurative language;* and according to a very common rule of Hebrew composition, which demands that the same thought be expressed twice in the same sentence—once figuratively and once literally—it is easy to see that the word *and* in each of these two texts is equivalent to the word *even*, and that the *washing* and *water* are only other forms of describing the renewing or regenerating agency of the Holy Spirit.

(3.) Scripture, adopting the name of the earthly ordinance to express the act of heavenly grace which it represents, repeatedly speaks of baptism with the Holy Ghost, never of baptism with the blood of Christ. Thus, marking at once the resemblance and the contrast between the figurative and the spiritual baptism, John says, “I indeed have baptized you with water, but He shall *baptize you with the Holy Ghost*.”—(Mark i. 8; Matthew iii. 11.) Our Saviour uses the same language, “For John truly baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized

much ingenuity against the Romish and Puseyite inference from this interpretation, that baptism and regeneration are simultaneous; but how he avoids the obvious conclusion, from his own interpretation of John iii. 5, that baptism is indispensably necessary to salvation, it is impossible to understand.

* Thus, also, the expression in John vi., *Eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of man*, neither means nor refers to the Lord's Supper, but is derived from the same idea as the ordinance, viz., the idea that Christ, by his body and blood, purchased, and in himself possesses, all that is necessary for our spiritual life and nourishment.

with the Holy Ghost.”—(Acts i. 5, xi. 16.) And that it may not be imagined that the promised spiritual baptism comprehended nothing more than a communication of miraculous gifts, the apostle describes it as consisting in the saving renovation of the soul, “For *by one Spirit* are we all baptized into one body.”—(1 Cor. xii. 13.) And though the name of the Holy Spirit is not mentioned, his work is evidently denoted in the similar figurative use of the name of the ordinance, in Rom. vi. 3, 4; Gal. iii. 27; Col. ii. 12.

(4.) The baptism with water, which, as an initiatory rite, is to be administered only once, corresponds better with the Spirit’s act of regeneration, which is never repeated, than with the sprinkling of Christ’s blood, of which, in order to the removal of guilt, believers need the renewal day by day.

2. The *sacramental action* is THE WASHING WITH WATER IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY GHOST. In general, this may be said to signify the Spirit’s cleansing of our souls from the pollution of sin. But though he does this throughout the whole course of our sanctification, yet because, as has just been remarked, the baptismal washing is an initiatory rite observed once for all, it must be regarded as representing the instantaneous and decisive effect of the Spirit’s first coming into saving contact with the soul—that is, our regeneration. Thus understood, this action in infant baptism is peculiarly

significant, and emphatically illustrates and confirms several important and primary Scripture doctrines.

(1.) It teaches the doctrine of man's *original depravity*. The baptism of infants implies that they stand in need of spiritual cleansing ; but, as they have not committed actual sin, nor contracted pollution from education or example, it is evident that their sinfulness is inherent and original, that they have derived a corrupt and sinful nature from our first parents.

(2.) It teaches *that the renovation of our hearts must be effected from without ourselves*. The water poured upon the body by the appointment of God, exhibits the Holy Spirit as the alone author of our spiritual regeneration. It is not by the development of any good qualities which are latent in us, nor by any efforts originating in ourselves, that the depravity of our hearts is to be overcome and removed, but by an act of divine power, in which we are as truly passive as is the most unconscious infant under the dispensation of the baptismal water.

(3.) It teaches *that our renewal and salvation are entirely of grace, and not of works*. Infants have performed no good works. They have done "neither good nor evil." Whatever may have been at any time said of the goodness, or purity, or innocence of the souls of infants, no one has ever attributed to them the possession of a meritorious righteousness of their own. When, therefore, on them, all

unrighteous as they are, the emblematical water is poured, can there be a more expressive illustration of the doctrine that we do not become the objects of God's favour because of anything good in us? Can there be a more exact representation of the subject of the Church's thankful acknowledgment, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he hath saved us, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost?" And does it not cast some light on our Saviour's saying, "Except ye be converted and become as little children"—except ye stand before him as destitute of righteousness of your own as little children are—"ye cannot enter the kingdom of God?"

(4.) It teaches *that infants are not incapable of being the subjects of saving grace*. If infants were known to be in no case capable of receiving the thing signified, the sign could not be imparted to them without impropriety and profanation. It does not declare with regard to any particular infant that he is saved, far less does it regenerate and save him; but it teaches that infants may be saved, and thus is in harmony with our Saviour's gracious words, "Suffer little children to come unto me."

(5.) Baptism (not infant baptism merely) teaches *the connexion between the work of the Holy Ghost and the work of Christ*. The sacrament does not consist merely in the washing with water, but in "the washing with water in the name of the Father,

and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Whatever fitness there is in both the element and the bare action to symbolise the great things of salvation, yet they do not receive this symbolical signification, any more than their sacramental virtue, without the accompanying word.* When, therefore, the baptismal water is poured out, and along with this we hear the proclamation of the thrice blessed name, we are taught that the outpouring of the Spirit in regenerating efficacy is one of the fruits of the covenant of grace. For not otherwise than in this covenant are the three persons of the Godhead revealed to us. And while the very mention of their distinctive names suggests that each has his several part in the work of our salvation, the ordinance, as thus administered, reminds us that the Spirit imparts his grace in harmony with the purpose of the Father and the Son, and in orderly dependence on their counsel and operation ; that he does not come to any soul except in consequence of that work of Christ in which the covenant has

* " For as there cannot be a seal, but that quhilk is the seal of ane evident, and gif the seal be separated fra the evident, it is not a seal ; bot look quhat it is be nature, it is na mair ; sa there cannot be a sacrament, except it be hung to the evident of the word ; bot look what the sacrament was be nature, it is na mair. Was it a common piece bread, it remains common bread, except it be hung to the evident of the word. Therefore the word only cannot be a sacrament, nor the element only cannot be a sacrament ; but word and element conjointly make a sacrament ; and sa Augustine said weill, Let the word come to the element, and ye sall have a sacrament."—Robert Bruce's *Sermons on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*.—Wodrow Society Edition, p. 7.

been confirmed and irrevocably sealed ; that he cannot regenerate any single soul beyond the limits which Christ's redemption embraces, or except as he is sent forth by the Father to apply the blessings which the Son has purchased, to manifest and magnify the virtue of his precious blood.

(6.) It teaches that regeneration, which the washing with water represents, *produces faith in the name, and subjection to the authority, of the triune God.* The expression employed in the baptismal formula is not "*in the name,*" as if it were merely meant that baptism is administered under the sanction and by the appointment of God, but "*into the name,*" as if this name were, in some sense, the end or object to which baptism points. The Israelites are said to have been "baptized *into* Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. x. 2), because that deliverance in which Moses had been their leader was the last and brightest of a long series of attestations to his being the vicegerent of God, and implied their obligation to surrender themselves to him in most implicit confidence and submission, to be so thoroughly one with him, as if their own wills and purposes were absorbed into his. Our being baptized "*into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,*" implies a similar devotedness—implies our cherishing a soul-subduing reverence to that thrice holy name, or rather to Him who, in that name, makes himself

known to us as the God of the everlasting covenant, the knowledge of whose glory is revealed "in the face of Jesus Christ." This reverence may be described as comprised in faith on his testimony concerning Jesus, and obedience to his commandments; and the fact of its being by water that we are baptized, emphatically signifies, that regeneration, our being "born of water and the Spirit," produces in us these results—not only washes the soul from sin, but also implants faith and new obedience—not only destroys "the old man with his lusts," but creates the elements of the new man after the image of God, "in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. iv. 24).

(7.) It teaches that *an immediate consequence of regeneration is the union of the soul to Christ*. It signifies "our ingrafting into Christ and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace." This is not merely an inference from what has just been stated regarding faith as one of the fruits of regeneration, but it is the distinct and independent testimony of numerous Scripture passages. One of these is Gal. iii. 27, "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." The expression "baptized into Christ" very evidently cannot mean *sacramentally baptized with water*, for both the context and the analogy of Scripture language demand an interpretation of "putting on Christ," which is far from being applicable to "*as many as*" have received the outward

ordinance. The apostle is not speaking of profession and sacrament, but of spiritual standing and spiritual experience. The "baptized into Christ" can, therefore, be only those who are vitally united to him by a union close, absorbing, and identifying, as we have already seen to be in some measure portrayed by the "being baptized into Moses." But what could have suggested or warranted the transference of the name of the outward ordinance to figure forth this most hidden and heavenly exercise of the Spirit's office, had not the ordinance itself been its selected symbol? And if so, what does the baptism with the Holy Ghost include? How much of blessing does his first contact with the sinner's soul communicate? It not merely creates a right spirit—it not merely writes the Divine laws upon the "fleshy tables" of the new heart—but, at the same moment, effectively revealing the glory of Christ, enables the soul, in the earliest exercise of its new dispositions, unhesitatingly, thankfully, adoringly, to embrace Christ as its sole righteousness and sufficient salvation; and thus uniting the sinner by faith to the Saviour, brings him into the position of unassailable safety, as if hiding his life in the very body of Christ. "For by one spirit we are all baptized into one body."

Still more distinctly and forcibly, perhaps, is this signification of baptism unfolded in other passages. For when the apostle speaks of believers as not only "baptized into Jesus Christ,"

but "baptized into his death," nay, "buried with him by baptism into death" (Rom. vi. 3, 4), and "buried with him in baptism" (Col. ii. 12), he is evidently describing not the sacramental, but the spiritual baptism—"baptism with the Holy Ghost." His meaning is rendered very plain by similar expressions which he uses elsewhere. Thus he speaks of believers as "dead with Christ" (Rom. vi. 8), "dead to the law by the body of Christ" (Rom. vii. 4), and "crucified with Christ" (Gal. ii. 20), in the sense of their having his sufferings and death accounted to them for the expiation of their sins. So soon as by that faith, which is "of the operation of God," we accept and trust the death of Jesus as our sufficient atonement, we are regarded in the eye of the eternal and righteous law as one with him, yea, as having been comprehended and represented in him throughout all his vicarious work, as having shared in his death and grave, because, indeed, they were our punishment, and as entitled to the reward of his finished obedience, as if it had been rendered by ourselves. When, therefore, the apostle speaks of our being "baptized" by the Holy Ghost "into Christ's death," and by this baptism "buried with him," he not only vividly represents our spiritual oneness with the Redeemer's person, but describes this oneness as effected through the Holy Ghost's bringing us to realise the Saviour's death as our ransom, and thus securing us in the participation of all the

blessed realities of his righteousness and resurrection.

Of these truths, then, baptism, and especially infant baptism, is significant. And thus understood, how beautifully does it combine with the other sacrament, in giving a complete representation of the work of grace in the soul from its commencement to its consummation! In the Lord's Supper, we see the believer in the house of God, enjoying communion with him, offering spiritual sacrifices, living on the most plentiful and costly provision which Heaven can supply, engaged in the services which shall occupy him, and enjoying the gifts which shall be sufficient for him, to the last moment of his earthly existence. Yea, through this ordinance, we are permitted to see him even after he has passed within the veil; for is it not the emblem and the earnest of "the marriage-supper of the Lamb," of the "gathering together unto God of all his saints," of the eating of the "tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." And in baptism we read all the preceding part of the believer's spiritual history—from the time when he was "by nature a child of wrath, even as others"—lost and helpless—till, of God's mere mercy, he is made, through the Holy Spirit, the partaker of a heavenly life and a divine nature, and is, through union to the Saviour, advanced to reconciliation with God, "put among the children" in the Father's house,

and, on the very threshold, welcomed with the gladdening salutation, "Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."

But is baptism no more than a sign? We do not undervalue or lightly estimate its function of teaching heavenly truths through earthly elements, of illustrating the doctrines of salvation, and addressing to the eye the messages which the words of Scripture address to the ear. But still we ask—Does it serve no other purpose than this? When a child has this ordinance administered to him, is he merely used as a convenient instrument upon which to repeat to the Church this exhibition or scenic representation of Divine truth? Does the baptism say nothing with regard to that particular child more than with regard to all other children in the world? Does it neither create nor indicate any special relation between that child and God? If so, then baptism holds a peculiar and isolated place amongst the many ritual observances which God has from the beginning instituted in the Church. The sacrifices not merely held forth to view the doctrine of a promised atonement, but marked the relation of the worshipper to God—were understood to express his confession and confidence; and if he was intelligent and sincere in his observance, they conveyed a message of peace to him from God.

The Lord's Supper, by the very terms of its institution, can be fitly observed only by those who are within the limits of that covenant of which it speaks. And, finally, circumcision, into the place of which we understand baptism to have come, is expressly described as a seal of the covenant, marking the children of Abraham as embraced within it, and confirming to them its promises as their inheritance? And how can we suppose that baptism—which is symbolical of the same spiritual purity as circumcision, “the circumcision of the heart” (Col. ii. 11)—has a lower place among the ordinances of the Church—that it is not also a seal to those to whom it rightfully belongs?

II. Let us then, secondly, inquire of what baptism, especially as administered to infants, is a SEAL.

When we consider the manner in which Scripture warrants us to employ this word to describe a ritual observance, we cannot avoid the conclusion that it has its proper and accurate analogy in the use of a seal amongst men to confirm covenant engagements—to add a stronger security to the obligation which a signature imposes.* The rainbow, called the *token*, was, in this sense, the seal of God's covenant that He would not overwhelm the earth with a second deluge. It was not the covenant itself—nor did it enter into the making of the covenant—nor was it merely an evidence or commemoration of the covenant's having been made;

* Neh. ix. 38.

but it was the evidence or pledge that the covenant would be kept—so that, on the one hand, God thus speaks of it, “I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature;” and, on the other hand, when man looks on it, he may assure himself that as certainly as that bow is in the cloud, so certainly will God never again send “a flood to destroy all flesh” (Gen. ix. 11, 16).

Circumcision, in a somewhat similar manner, was a seal of God’s covenant-promise to Abraham. The apostle speaks of the “sign of circumcision” as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had being yet uncircumcised” (Rom. v. 11), that is, a seal of God’s promise to account to him for justification that righteousness—the law-fulfilling righteousness of the Saviour—which Abraham had already by faith accepted. It was not, on the part of God, the seal or attestation of Abraham’s faith, or of his being a believer. On Abraham’s part, his having received this sign may have been an evidence of his faith; but, on the part of God, it was a seal or attestation to the sufficiency and availableness of the “righteousness” which was the substance of the promise—a seal superadded to the covenant which had been founded on the provided “righteousness,” and into which Abraham had by faith previously entered—a seal or assurance to Abraham that if he was indeed a believer, or as certainly as he was a believer, so certainly

would all God's promises to him be fulfilled. And when, from this statement of the apostle, we look back to the original institution of the rite,* we find that it was the pledge and attestation, on the part of God, to those who received it, not that they were Abraham's children (it might be erroneously or deceitfully administered by man), but that, as surely as they were in the line of prescribed descent, would they possess the temporal inheritance, and as surely as the spiritual condition was fulfilled in them would they be "justified with faithful Abraham."

The Lord's Supper presents us with another obvious illustration. It is not the covenant itself—nor is it the making of the covenant—nor is it the means or the occasion of bringing us into it. We are understood to have previously become, by faith, personally interested in the covenant. In the very act of observing the supper, each worshipper professes his faith in Christ, his having accepted the death of Jesus as the sacrifice for his sins, and his reliance on him for all spiritual blessings. He is understood to say, "As truly as I now take this bread and this cup into my hands, as truly as I eat this bread and drink this wine, so truly do I take the crucified Jesus to be my only Saviour, and rely on him alone for par-

* Gen. xvii. 10, "This is my covenant," evidently meaning, this is the seal of my covenant, "which ye shall keep, between me and you, and thy seed after thee; Every man-child among you shall be circumcised."

don, for spiritual nourishment, for eternal life." It is on the supposition of his intelligence and sincerity that the sacramental elements are put into his hands, as a seal of God's promise *to him* individually. And God, through these, is saying to him, "If you are what you profess to be—a believer, then as surely as you now eat of this bread and drink of this cup, so surely will I give you Christ's body and blood, the things which these elements signify, to nourish and feed you unto life eternal." If the heart-searching One were himself directly the administrator of this ordinance, and if only those were admitted to it whose faith, like that of Abraham, was manifest in His sight, He would address them no otherwise, except that the condition would be no longer necessary to be announced, and the promise would be as absolute in form as any example which Scripture contains.* In this case, to each communicant God might be understood as saying, "As surely as I now put this bread and this cup into your hands, so certainly give I unto *you* the body and blood of Jesus to nourish you to life eternal." This same promise is distinctly held forth in the Bible to every believer. And the Lord's Supper, *as a seal*, is only

* Heb. viii. 8-11 ; Jer. xxxi. 31-34, afford a specimen of a promise absolute in appearance. But the promise is exhibited as part of the covenant ; it is, indeed, called "the covenant." The condition is implied, viz.—the work of Christ. This condition is not stated, only because it is regarded as having been fulfilled, and there consequently rested no contingency on the fulfilment of the promise.

a repetition of this promise. Is it asked, Of what use can it be, if it amounts to no more than this? It is like the oath (Heb. vi. 17, 18), an attestation superadded to the promise, for helping the infirmity of our faith; and the statement made regarding the one is applicable to the other, "God, willing *more abundantly* to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath; that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us."

In baptism, also, as administered to adults, the signs not only represent gospel truth, but also exhibit gospel promise. The sacramental signs, and the New Testament instances, define the position of the adult in receiving this ordinance. He professes to have those feelings which are the earliest fruits of regeneration—repentance of his sins—a desire to wash them away *—and faith, for the

* Mark i. 4, 5; Acts ii. 38. It is important to notice the connexion which these passages seem to recognise between baptism and the spiritual blessing. John's baptism is called the "baptism of repentance for (unto) the remission of sins." The outward rite itself did not ensure pardon, but repentance did. Repentance was "unto forgiveness;" and baptism, which was the sign, or implied the profession of repentance, was therefore called the baptism of (or, signifying) that repentance which is unto forgiveness. The exhortation of Peter on the day of Pentecost sets forth this same connexion between these three. The command of Ananias to Paul (Acts xxii. 16), "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord," may be understood either as meaning that, by being baptized, he would openly and conclusively abjure his former

realisation of this, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; and in the administration of it, God says, "If you are what you profess to be, then as surely as this water is now applied to you, so assuredly are you, and shall you be, 'engrafted into Christ,' and made a 'partaker of all the blessings of the covenant of grace.'" Baptism does not make him a partaker, but is a means of enabling him, if he have faith, to cherish the assurance that he will partake for ever.

From these instances, then, it appears that the sacraments are at once *signs of gospel doctrine* and *seals of gospel promise*. They are not seals or attestations, on the part of God, to the character of the receiver.* Their function, as seals, presupposes that the receiver has a certain character; and on this supposition they seal or confirm to him the promise that God will bestow certain blessings. They do not seal the same grace which constitutes the supposed character, nor any grace as presently or previously possessed, but the promise that future grace will be imparted. Whatever else they may be as channels of grace, or badges of Christian profession—that will be after-

profession, and all the sins which it implied, or as ascribing the washing away of sins to his "calling on the name of the Lord," his believing prayer for the blessings signified and sealed in baptism.

* The sealing of the Spirit must not be confounded with the seals of the covenant. The Spirit seals, or inwardly marks, individuals as the children, or people, or property of God, Eph. i. 13, iv. 30. The sacraments outwardly seal the promises of the covenant to believers as their inheritance.

wards considered—yet *as seals*, they are nothing more than outward significant pictorial proposals to the individual believer of those promises as made to him individually, which, in the word, are made to all believers in common, and they are designed so to set both the substance and the security of the promises before every receiver who believes in Christ, that he may be able, with increased confidence and joyfulness, to appropriate them, and to anticipate their fulfilment to himself. They rank along with God's written *word* of promise, as a "visible word" of promise, and although they tell us nothing more than the written word, yet they tell it more impressively; and by this twofold proclamation, God appears as "willing more abundantly to shew to the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, that those might have a *strong consolation*," in the confidence and expectation of future blessing, "who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before them" (Heb. vi. 17, 18).*

* "The sacraments serve to this end also, to seal up and confirm the truth that is in the Word; for as the office of the seal hung to the evident is not to confirm another truth than that which is in the evident; and suppose ye believed the evident of it before, yet by the seals ye believe it the better. Even so, the sacrament assures men of no other truth than is contained within the Word; yet, because it is a seal annexed to the Word, it persuades men the better of the same; for as the manner that the outward senses be awakened, the manner is the inward heart and mind persuaded to belief. Now, the sacrament awakens all the outward senses, such as the eye, the hand, and all the rest; and the outward senses being moved, no question but the Spirit of truth concurring therewith moves the

In this same meaning the sacraments have been explained to be *seals* by the confessions of the Reformed Churches. The definition in our Shorter Catechism is accordant with it—"A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers." In the 25th Article of the Church of England it is said, "Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain *sure witnesses* and effectual signs of grace and God's goodwill *towards* us;" and in the 27th Article it is more particularly said, that by baptism "the *promises* of forgiveness, &c., are visibly signed and sealed." In language still more explicit, the Heidelberg Catechism (*Qu.* 66) teaches that "sacraments are holy visible signs and seals appointed by God for this end, that, by the use thereof, he may the *more fully declare and seal to us the promise* of the Gospel, in that he grants us fully the remission of sin and life eternal, for the sake of that one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross;" and (*Qu.* 69) "that Christ appointed this external washing with

heart the mair. The sacraments are then annexed to the Word, to seal up the truth contained in the Word, and to confirm it mair and mair in thy heart. Then quhat have ye to do? The Word is appointed to work belief, and the sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief; but except ye put the truth of this inwardly in your hearts—except ye have your hearts as ready as your mouths, think not that any thing will avail you."—Robert Bruce's *Sermons on the Lord's Supper*, p. 29.

water, adding thereto this promise, that I am *as certainly* washed by his blood and spirit from all the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sin, as I am washed externally with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away ;” and again, that in the Lord’s Supper “Christ has commanded one and all believers to eat of this broken bread, and to drink of this cup, in remembrance of him, adding these promises—first, that his body was offered and broken on the cross for me, and his blood shed for me, as certainly as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me, and the cup communicated to me ; and farther, that he feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life with his crucified body and shed blood, *as assuredly as I receive from the hands of the minister, and taste with my mouth, the bread and cup of the Lord* as certain signs of the body and blood of Christ.” To these statements may be added Calvin’s definition of a sacrament as “an outward testimony of divine love *towards* us, which, by a visible sign, represents spiritual blessings, for the sealing of the promises of God upon our hearts, that their truth may be the more confirmed” (*Catechism of Geneva*), and his explanation of the reason of God *sealing his promises with sacraments*, viz., “According to the definition which we have given, we understand that a sacrament never is without a preceding promise, but rather is joined to it as a certain appendix, to the end that it may confirm

and seal the promise itself, and make it to us more attested, yea, in a manner ratified. In this way the Lord makes needful provision, first, for our ignorance and dulness, then for our weakness ; and yet, properly speaking, not so much to confirm his holy word as to establish in us the belief of it.” —(*Institutes* iv. 14, 3.)*

But of what is baptism a seal, as administered to

* The argument of Dr Halley against this view, and in support of the idea that the sacraments are mere symbols, seems to be founded on a simple misunderstanding. When the sacraments are called seals, he regards this as meaning that they are seals not of grace *promised*, but of grace *already possessed*. Thus he says, “ It would seem to follow that the adherents of the latter opinion (the Reformed) ought to administer the sacraments or seals only to those who have *previously received the grace which they attest* ; whereas the adherents of the former (the Romish) ought to administer them only to such as are destitute of that grace. If baptism, for instance, be the *seal of regeneration*, it should be administered only to the regenerate ; if the means of regeneration, only to the unregenerate.” —(*The Sacraments*, vol. i. p. 78.) This smart saying is at once set aside by the fact that baptism, though it may be called the *sign*, is not counted the *seal* of regeneration, but the seal of God’s *promise* to bestow upon the regenerate the blessings which follow regeneration, or, as we shall immediately see, to bestow the blessing of regeneration itself upon the children of the regenerate. Under the influence of the same misunderstanding he says again, “ This doctrine of sealing God’s grace to individuals by a sacrament, can amount to no more than a hypothetical sealing, a sealing of God’s grace upon the supposition that the person is already possessed of *that grace* ; a seal which, to be of any worth, must be itself accredited or attested by the grace which it is said to seal or ratify” (p. 87) ; and proceeds to argue against this notion as inconsistent with the doctrine of justification by faith. He supposes it to mean that the “ worthy observance of the sacrament” is the “ obsignation of grace,” that is, of being in a state of grace ; and hence maintains that this makes the “ worthy reception, the good work of the man, the seal and assurance of eternal life, so that, instead of looking entirely and exclusively to Christ Jesus, he

infants? Of what promise does it recognise them to be heirs who can make no profession of faith? Are all infants equally entitled to this seal? Or if not, on what principle can it discriminate or mark a spiritual difference or distinction amongst them, since they are all equally born in sin, and, at the same time, are all equally unconscious of their state?

The solution of this difficulty is furnished in

is looking upon himself, amidst the deceitfulness of his own heart, for seals and verifications of his own justification.”—(P. 86.) It needs only to be answered, that as our worthy reception is not the *seal*, but is only our believing acceptance of the seal, and is nothing different from our appropriating faith in God’s promise, all this jealousy for the purity of evangelical doctrine is singularly misplaced. The *seal* is the outward sacrament, not our feelings or actings towards it, and is God’s bringing the word of his promise home more visibly and impressively to the faith of the individual believing receiver. If a believer can, without impropriety, self-righteousness, or false logic, appropriate to himself the word of promise—can hear God speaking to *himself* in the word of promise—he may surely appropriate to himself the seal of promise, hear God’s voice more clearly in it, have a more vivid and realising assurance of his interest in the promise, when the seal of it is put into his own hand, and he is thus individualised in God’s announcement of it. The sacraments are, in a certain sense, seals or attestations of God’s promises to all spectators—signs which confirm and illustrate the promises as part of divine doctrine; but if they are not more as seals to the receiver than they are to all other men, even to all believers—if in receiving he is only part of the symbolic instrumentality, this is his own fault, his crime, in not being a believing or worthy receiver. If he were so, the sacrament would be, in the act of receiving it, a seal to himself individually of divine promise, not as mere doctrine, but as promise made to himself. It is worthy of remark that Dr Halley concurs with Bellarmine in interpreting the text noticed above, Rom. iv. 11, as meaning, that circumcision was a seal to Abraham in the sense of being a “testimony of his faith” (p. 83, *note*), and does not even advert to the idea of its being a *seal* of God’s promise of justifying righteousness on the condition of faith.

God's covenant as renewed with Abraham at the institution of the rite of circumcision—"I will establish my covenant between me and thee and *thy seed after thee* in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to thee, and *to thy seed after thee*. And I will give unto thee, and *to thy seed after thee*, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and *I will be their God*."—(Gen. xvii. 7, 8.) To whatever extent this covenant refers to the temporal inheritance, the apostle Paul places beyond a doubt that it includes a spiritual promise (Rom. iv. 11-13; Gal. iii. 14-18); and the apostle Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, makes it farther evident that this spiritual promise belongs to Abraham's children by natural descent—"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, for the *promise is unto you and to your children*, and to all that are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call."—(Acts ii. 38, 39.)* The

* It has been not uncommon to restrict the promise spoken of by Peter in the 39th verse to the prophecy of Joel quoted in v. 16-21. And Baumgarten, in his most valuable commentary, not only adopts this view, but also understands "all that are afar off" to be not the Gentiles (Eph. ii. 17), but simply those Jews who were not now present in Jerusalem. There are strong reasons against this interpretation. Great part of that special prophecy quoted from Joel, *e.g.*, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy," &c., is not applicable to all those whom the promise embraces. The quotation of that prophecy stands at a great distance, even in the *reported* discourse, from this mention of the promise. Other important prophecies are

children spoken of in both these passages must be understood not in the figurative sense in which the word sometimes describes those who are partakers of the same faith (Gal. iii. 7), or points out the instrumentality of their conversion (1 Cor. iv. 14, 15, Philem. 10), but primarily and literally as offspring according to the flesh. For if not, in the first passage the temporal inheritance would be promised to a people distinct and different from the nation of Israel; and in the second passage, there would be no distinction between the "children" and those that are afar off, *whom God would call*. We must, therefore, face the inevitable conclusion—explain it how we may—that God has taken into covenant with himself the children of believers by reason of their natural descent; that He is their God in that same spiritual sense in which He is the God of their believing parents; that the promises of the gospel are made to them, not merely as they may be said to be extended to all men, if they will accept of them, but in a more definite and special sense, as promises made to those for whom the Lord has a purpose of redeeming mercy; that in this sermon of the apostle Peter, those whom he addresses, because descendants of Abraham, though so long

quoted in the interval, to which, rather than to the prophecy of Joel, the emphatic appellation of "the promise" might be understood to belong. For this expression seems to have had a recognised and definite meaning, as denoting that great fundamental covenant promise of the seed of Abraham, "in whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Acts xxvi. 6, 7).

impenitent, and not yet more than anxious and inquiring, are, along with their children, ranked as equally subjects of promise with those whom the Lord will effectually *call* from among the families of the heathen.

To understand and vindicate this statement of God's relation to the children of his people, it is necessary to view it in the light of two Scripture principles which regulate his dealings with them.

From one set of Scripture passages, we learn that God cherishes towards them feelings of peculiar affection and friendship. They are "*beloved for the fathers' sake*," not only within the limits of the Jewish covenant, but in all the habitations of his saints. On their fathers' account he visits them with both temporal and spiritual blessings: "I have been young, and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, *nor his seed begging bread*. He is ever merciful, and lendeth, and his *seed is blessed*."—(Ps. xxxvii. 25, 26.) "*His seed shall be mighty upon earth*, the generation of the upright shall be blessed."—(Ps. cxii. 2.) "In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence; and *his children shall have a place of refuge*."—(Prov. xiv. 26.) "I will gather them out of all countries whither I have driven them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God: and I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and *of their children after them*."—(Jer. xxxii. 37–39.) "The mercy of the

Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, and his righteousness *to children's children*."—(Ps. ciii. 17.)

"When thou shalt return unto the Lord thy God, then the Lord will turn thy captivity, and will circumcise thy heart, and the *heart of thy seed*, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart."—(Deut. xxx. 2-6.) And, finally, as if in order to mark more strongly the principle according to which he regards the family as identified with the parent, and like the branches of a tree partaking of the sap or of the decay of the stem, he says, "I am a jealous God, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children* unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate me, and shewing mercy to thousands (of generations) of them that love me and keep my commandments."—(Ex. xx. 5, 6.)*

But as God does not promise either temporal prosperity or divine favour to the children of his people irrespective of their spiritual character, so he does not promise to form that character in them except in connection with the fidelity and diligence of the parents.

One great and manifest design of the institution of the family arrangement was the salvation of the young, and the preserving and perpetuating of the true religion in the world. Thus Malachi, reproving his fellow-countrymen for the frequency and facility with which in his day they allowed the marriage tie to be unloosed, says, "The Lord hath

* See also Isa. lix. 21, lxxv. 23; Deut. x. 15.

been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously : yet she is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did he not make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? *That he might seek a godly seed.*"—(Mal. ii. 14, 16.) And in order that this godly seed might be found, how often and how solemnly does God enjoin on parents the religious instruction of their children, and the faithful and affectionate employment of all the means which he has appointed for the conversion of their souls. "These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart : and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."—(Deut. vi. 6, 7.) "He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children : that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born, who should arise and declare them to their children : that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."—(Ps. lxxviii. 5-7.) "Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."—(Eph. vi. 4.)

These commands are accompanied with a pro-

mise. God animates and encourages his people to this assiduous care of their children by the assurance that he will render it effectual—that he will reward it by the renewal of the children's souls, and by rendering them meet for all the good he has spoken concerning them ; that “ for the fathers' sake,” for the sake of the fathers' personal godliness and parental care, the children will be owned as the “ beloved ” of the Lord. “ Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”—(Prov. xxii. 6.) “ These my words ye shall teach your children, that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon earth.”—(Deut. xi. 18–21.)* On the existence throughout the families of Israel of the reciprocal affection which implies parental godliness and fidelity, God suspends the welfare and preservation of the kingdom itself. “ Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet, and he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children ” first, and then, as if in consequence of this, “ the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”—(Mal. iv. 5, 6.) And, farther, we have another and still more notable declaration of this purpose of God, to follow up the godly diligence of the parents with a saving blessing to the children, in the very covenant with

* See also Deut. iv. 9, 10, 40.

Abraham. For the covenant portion which his posterity were to receive is set forth as the consequence and reward of Abraham's faithfulness—"Walk before me and be thou perfect, and I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee."—(Gen. xvii. 1, 2, 7.) We are not left to conjecture whether this *perfect* or upright walk of Abraham, on which these promises both to him and his seed were made to depend, included the proper discharge of his parental duties. The certainty of his being found faithful in this department of obedience God himself sets forth in this very connexion with his bestowal of the covenant blessing. "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? *For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.*"—(Gen. xviii. 17-19.)

But these promises, are they strictly and properly promises—declarations of God's determination and resolve? Or do they merely indicate what is likely to occur, or what will generally be realised in the given circumstances? Are they to be classed along with such a statement as this,

“The hand of the diligent maketh rich,”--which expresses the tendency of diligence in the ordinary course of things, but does not assure us that wealth will actually be its recompense in any particular case? The great and lasting influence of family-life in the formation of character is familiar to the observation and experience of every one. Beyond and above that influence for the salvation of the soul which is exerted by faithful ministers, or godly companions, or earnest labourers in Christian societies, is to be ranked, in point of intensity and efficacy, the influence of believing parents within the limits of the family circle. When the strongest affections that nature knows are sanctified and directed by Divine grace, when they are combined with intelligence and spiritual wisdom, when they have scope in the constant and confiding intercourse of domestic life, and when they have for their field the tender mind of childhood, with all its susceptibility to deep and permanent impressions, what circumstances can be conceived more favourable, or what means more likely for conversion? There is no cause to wonder that God should have formed mankind into families, and that to the wholesome and persuasive influences which circulate among their members he should assign so high a place among the means for continuing his name and memorial “throughout all generations” (Ps. cxxxv. 13).

But is this all? Do these passages only mean

that parental training is a suitable and very likely means for the conversion of children? Do they not secure that this will be its effect in any particular case? If we had nothing else to guide us to an answer than the text, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it," we might, perhaps, have cause to hesitate. It might be thought to be no more than a statement, like many other similar texts in the Book of Proverbs, of what was likely to happen,—a statement, indeed, not expressing the result of man's guesses or probabilities, or of man's observation or experience, but proceeding from God, and therefore much more reliable, because in every instance the promised fruit of parental training must be the gift of God, the effect of his own blessing. But yet it might be said it is not strictly and properly a promise,—a declaration of what God intends and resolves to do in every case in which the condition is fulfilled,—but only in the generality of these cases. We might, indeed, reply that this is not according to the recognised principles of his acting within the kingdom of grace. In the distribution of the things of this world, and amongst those who are without the bonds of his covenant, he very often—for reasons that we cannot penetrate—allots opposite results to equal diligence. But is it in accordance with his ordinary procedure amongst his people, or his covenant engagements to them, that he should bestow on them the grace of parental

fidelity in all its fulness, and then, not on account of any failure in its use, but for a reason altogether apart from them, that he should disappoint the expectation which such a declaration warrants?

But even on this scarcely doubtful ground we do not need to stand. For this very declaration is substantially embodied in the covenant with Abraham, and has all the sanction with which every other of its promises was secured. If it was in any spiritual sense that God promised to make Abraham a great and mighty nation, and to be the God of his seed after him, then the integrity of his walk before God (Gen. xvii. 1), the fidelity with which he trained his children in the way they should go (Gen. xviii. 19), was not so much the condition on which the temporal possession was to be held, as the condition on which his children were to inherit the spiritual blessing, on which God was to be their God, and they were to be his people. And they who partake of Abraham's faith are heirs also of the same promise. On the same condition as in the case of Abraham, he takes their children along with themselves into his covenant. He promises to be their children's God, when he knows that they will command them to keep the way of the Lord.

Any remaining doubt on this point, baptism, as, on scriptural warrant, administered to infants, should remove. The promise of God's sustaining a peculiar relation to the children of his people,

baptism at once illustrates and seals. In no other case is there a more exact accordance between the sign and the thing signified, between the covenant promise and the seal. In the Lord's Supper, God is to be understood as saying to the communicant, "If you are what you profess to be,—a believer,—then as surely as you eat this bread and drink this wine, so surely shall I give you to eat of Christ's flesh, and to drink of Christ's blood, unto eternal life." In baptism, God is to be understood as saying to the parent, "If you are what you profess to be,—a believer,—and if you do what you undertake to do, 'to train up this child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,'—then as surely as this water is now poured upon its body, so surely shall I pour the regenerating Spirit upon its soul." God did not indeed speak so hypothetically and conditionally to Abraham, for "he knew Abraham;" and if man had the same certainty about the character and future history of any parent as the All-seeing One had regarding the father of the faithful, the language of the ordinance would be expressed in the same form as the statement of God regarding him, "Because you are a believer, and will command your children to keep the way of the Lord, as surely as this water is now poured on this child, so surely will I be its God." Baptism does not constitute the promise; nor does God's entering into this covenant engagement depend upon the ordinance. The promise was made

previously, on the parent entering into covenant with God, and would have been as valid and as ample, though baptism had never been instituted. But baptism, though not needed to bind or to renew the promise, is a confirmation of it to the parent's faith, and a help to enable him to apply it to the individual child, and thus more firmly to rely upon the Word of God, and more confidently to cherish the expectation of the blessing.*

* The testimonies of the Reformed Churches are mostly in the direction of this view of the warrant and meaning of infant baptism. Our *Larger Catechism* says,—“Infants, descending from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ and obedience to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and to be baptized.” Calvin, in the Geneva Catechism, in answer to the question, “Why, then, are children to be baptized?” says,—“That it may be testified that they are heirs of the blessing promised to the seed of believers; that the truth of their baptism being recognised after they have grown to maturity, they may receive and bring forth fruit from it.” And in the order for the administration of the Sacraments in the Church of Geneva, we find him saying,—“Therefore, although the children of the faithful are of the corrupt stock of Adam, God nevertheless receives them to himself, on account of his covenant with their parents, and reckons them his own children. On this account, from the beginning of the Church, he commanded them to receive circumcision, a sign which signified the same things which at present are represented in baptism.” And the Heidelberg Catechism answers the question, “Are infants also to be baptized?” in these words,—“Yes, for since they as well as the adult are included in the covenant and Church of God, and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, are promised to them no less than to the adult, they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian Church, and be distinguished from the children of infidels (unbelievers), as was done in the Old Covenant or Testament, by circumcision, instead of which baptism is instituted in the New Covenant.” — (Qu. 74.)

It is necessary to consider whether any valid exception can be taken to this interpretation of the covenant promise as setting forth, and of the sacrament as sealing, this relation of God to the children of believers.

1. It is no valid objection that this promise is *conditional*, its fulfilment being suspended upon man's fidelity and holiness. The covenant-promises, as made to Christ on behalf of his people, may be said to be absolute, because Christ's execution of his covenant work was always certain, and is now completed. They are, indeed, not only absolute, but definite, arranging, according to God's eternal counsel, the every step of the course along which He is to conduct His elect, and determining the point of saving attainment to which He is to carry them with reference to the measure of grace which He may resolve previously to impart. But the promises, as made to his people in the administration of the covenant, are necessarily general, as when a believer is assured that he shall be saved, that he shall make progress in the life of holiness, that his prayers shall be heard; or when not thus general, they must be conditional. Without entering further into the doctrinal topic, we may merely adduce as an illustration the promise to answer prayer. This promise is suspended on a condition,—“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”—(John xv. 7.) No otherwise is the pro-

mise which is sealed in baptism, on behalf of a child, conditional. "If you are a believer, and if you act a believing parent's part, this child shall be saved." In the one case, the worshipper must offer the proper supplication, the prayer of faith, for things according to Christ's will. In the other, the parent must employ the appropriate means, the work of faith, in the exercise of holy diligence. In each case the result is certain only upon the condition being fulfilled.

2. It cannot be fairly objected that this view is inconsistent with the doctrine of *God's sovereignty*, in that He "has mercy on whom He will have mercy" (Rom. ix. 15), without rendering to any a reason for his choice. For, (1.) It is of His sovereign pleasure that He gives or withholds, in the case of any believing parent, the grace of which parental fidelity is the fruit. This parental fidelity, therefore, being the gift of God, His sovereignty is not excluded or nullified by its being the infallible antecedent of an ulterior dispensation of sovereign grace. And, (2.) While God acts as an absolute sovereign among those that are without, so that we cannot discern the reason of His choosing one and passing by another; yet among those who are brought within His spiritual household, He dispenses His grace according to principles which are not only fixed, but revealed. His sovereignty within His kingdom is not, indeed, a limited sovereignty, but is exercised according to

laws which He himself has fixed, and according to promises by which He has bound Himself to His people. When they are obedient, He comforts them ; when they transgress, He chastises them ; when they are broken-hearted, He revives them ; when they are humble, " He gives more grace " (James iv. 6) ; when they pray, He answers them. And no otherwise than in these cases does He either renounce or limit His sovereignty, when, looking on His people as identified with their children, He promises to reward their parental fidelity by their children's salvation, by giving them their souls for their hire. It was not a limitation, but an illustration of His sovereignty, that from among all the families of the earth He chose the seed of Abraham and the tribes of Jacob to transmit the knowledge of His name, and to constitute His Church and people ; and, in like manner, it is no infringement of His sovereignty that He now designs to preserve and perpetuate His Church along the line of natural descent in the families of those whom He has chosen to be His people.

For again, (1.) He does not confine His Church within the limits of descent from a godly parentage, but just as in Judah there was provision for receiving amongst the families and into the congregation of Israel, individuals from different nations ; so now also, yea, and much more extensively, are the privileges of God's people extended to as many out of ungodly or heathen families as may

flee for refuge to the Hope of Israel,—to “as many as the Lord our God shall call.” He does not bind Himself that He will save none who have not had a godly ancestry. Of such He saves whom He will, and makes them, thus saved, the commencement of so many additional lines along which His promise may run and His Church be perpetuated.

And (2.) He does not promise to perpetuate His Church in the line of descent from every godly parentage, nor in all cases and for ever to include the families of the godly within his spiritual Church. His promise is made not simply with His people, but with His people on the condition of their training up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The godly are not exempt from the danger of falling into any sin. Their sins and inconsistencies are oftentimes grievous and aggravated; and, in the orderly discipline of His house, the Father unfailingly visits them with needful and appropriate chastisement. Though He does not cast them out of His family, or recal His covenant, He does not allow them to go without rebuke. “If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: but my mercy shall not depart away from him.”—(2 Sam. vii. 14, 15.)* When their transgressions assume the form of parental unfaithfulness or neglect,—as indeed every sin committed by a parent is in its influence, if not in its form,—

* See also Ps. lxxxix. 30-34.

they may cut off the entail of covenant standing and promised blessing from the children. Even the temporal part of the covenant was administered upon this principle. On account of the sins of previous generations, the children of Israel were dispossessed of their earthly inheritance. "For the Lord is a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children." And how many parents, like Eli, though saved themselves, have had to mourn the visitation of their own transgressions in the ungodliness of their children, in their families losing the link of spiritual connexion with the inheritance of grace, in the sad prospect that now "the iniquity of their house should not be purged with sacrifice and offering for ever" (1 Sam. iii. 14).

But (3.) God does not allow himself to be excluded, by the sins of parents, from making their children the subjects of His grace. The relation between Himself and the children of His people, so far as it is fixed by the covenant, is altogether one of grace and of promise. The children whom godly parents have nurtured in the Lord, have grace and salvation as their promised inheritance. These have the same sure standing as they whom "the Lord our God *shall call*" from amongst the families of the heathen or the ungodly (Acts ii. 39). Those, on the other hand, who, though under the roof of godly parents, have (alas! that it should ever be so) not been the objects of holy, watchful,

constant, tender care, this promise does not embrace. To the promise they stand in the same relation as the children of ungodly families,—not reprobated because of their fathers' neglect, but yet not chosen or beloved for their fathers' sakes. With more, it may be, of advantage or disadvantage, in the spiritual influences to which they have been subjected, than the children of the ungodly, they are equally with them the objects of the Gospel offer, and may equally with them be the subjects of saving mercy.

3. Nor can it be justly objected that this view attaches to parents an *undue amount of responsibility*.

The condition of the promise involves nothing more than is implied in that parental care which, even without a promise annexed, God is unquestionably entitled to exact of all parents; nay, which it is admitted on all hands that he does most solemnly and distinctly require. For what more comprehensive than the injunction, "Ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Nor is it necessary, in order to this promise, any more than in order to the promise of an answer to prayer, becoming obligatory, that perfect and sinless perfection be attained in our performance of the condition. The obedience of the believer, which is, through Christ's merits, well pleasing to God, and which ensures the recompense of

grace, is distinguished by sincerity, spirituality, willingness, and constancy.* Nor are we asked to discharge this or any other part of evangelical obedience in our own strength. The responsibility is indeed great, and on the contemplation of it the believing parent cannot avoid exclaiming, "Who is sufficient for these things?" But the answer is intended for this and every duty undertaken in honesty and faith, "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness." And all the elements that are included in the required exercise of parental care are the gifts of God's grace, and are placed as surely within the reach of the believer as any other of the most needful blessings of Christ's purchase. It is the hand of the Lord that first of all "turns the heart of the father to the children," to desire and long after their spiritual welfare. It is He who inspires prayerfulness in their behalf, and constant dependence on himself for all the guidance and strength which parental responsibility demands—who leads parents in the path of a holy example, maintains within them a constant and careful watchfulness, enlightens their minds as the medium of godly instruction, and enables them to combine firmness of discipline with tenderness of affection. And if it be said how inadequate all those, without the modifying and regulating influence of wisdom and judiciousness, we have only to remember that these,

* John xiv. 21, 23; 1 Cor. xv. 58; Heb. vi. 10, &c.

so far as applicable to this or any spiritual case, are also gifts of God's grace, and, on the same conditions as all others, attainable in needful measure by every believer. "If any of you lack *wisdom*, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."—(James i. 5.)

If the promise, though not altering the nature, yet increases the felt weight of the responsibility, consider how it also counterbalances and relieves the load. For how great is the encouragement and stimulus which the promise supplies! The salvation of children thus cared for is assured. And if the salvation of some is thus certain, let it be considered whether the others are placed in any worse condition than if there had been no such promise, or than they are on the supposition that the promises referred to are no more than declarations of what may generally be expected. Yea, what unspeakably augmented encouragement to parental diligence—beyond what mere general declaration can inspire—is contained in the promise, and in the seal, when faith discerns the seal's assurance of the Divine faithfulness and love. Parents have thus as great encouragement to watch, and labour, and suffer, and pray for their children's souls, as they have to "work out their own salvation with fear and trembling," from the consideration that "it is God that worketh in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure." And when we remember the peculiar value which God

sets on the family relation, and the affection which He has for the children of His people, we need not wonder that He, to this extent, identifies the parents with the children, that He so closely binds together the holiness of the parents and the salvation of the children—that no relation of ecclesiastical office, or of civil or social affinity, or of spiritual affection should so secure a blessing on the best-directed efforts for the souls of others as the parental tie. Ministers may “labour in vain, and spend their strength for nought,” having only this certain encouragement, that “their judgment is with the Lord, and their work with their God” (Isa. xlix. 4). Moses, when he longs for the forgiveness of the chosen race, can only hope, “*Peradventure* I shall make an atonement for your sin” (Ex. xxxii. 30). The most devoted and affectionate labourer in the vineyard cannot cherish a larger measure of hope regarding the conversion of any particular one among the objects of his prayers, and anxieties, and cares, than this *peradventure*,—“*it may be* the Lord will work for us” (1 Sam. xiv. 6); or “*it may be* the Lord God of hosts will be gracious” (Amos v. 15). What unspeakably greater encouragement if, in duly caring for the salvation of his children, equally as in working out his own, a godly parent knows that he “runs not as uncertainly; that he fights not as one that beateth the air” (1 Cor. ix. 26).

4. But does the testimony of *experience* sustain

this view of the promise and the seal? The difficulty which presses here is precisely of the same nature as when it is asked, Does experience confirm the truth of the promise that in every case the prayer of faith is heard? In both cases, how large and various the testimony to God's faithfulness! How numerous the instances, from all ages of the Church's history, in which the families of the godly have been a seed to serve the Lord in their generation! Is it not the case, that whilst there are many striking instances of conversion from amongst the ungodly, yet the Church receives by far its most numerous accessions from among the children of professing Christians? How frequent the instances, as of Augustine and others less illustrious, in which, after years of forgetfulness and sin, and after the hopes of the most sanguine were well-nigh gone, the children of believers have been at last converted to their fathers' God! How interesting that in so many instances it should be known that it has been the recollection of a father's example, or of a mother's prayers, or of childhood's early lessons, that has been the means of bringing the wanderer within the household of faith! And how important the testimony to this view of the covenant promise, by its accordance with the feelings of experienced and devout Christians, as so often expressed in the hope, which they refuse to surrender during the long and dreary years of the alienation of the children of

godly parents—"the child of so many prayers cannot be lost."

It happens, indeed, with lamentable frequency, that the line of the spiritual posterity is abruptly arrested. But in how many instances can we not discern the cause of this as clearly as in the example of Eli. In some it happens that excessive indulgence, in others that undue severity, in many that prevailing listlessness, or smaller inconsistencies visible only to the observant eye of youth within the domestic circle, have counteracted all the influence which might otherwise have radiated from a life in which, notwithstanding these things, the undoubted marks of a gracious character existed. In many instances the worldly prosperity which was the fruit and recompense of godliness, has induced conformities to the world, which have nullified the profession of parental watchfulness, and arrested the extension of the covenant lineage and the covenant blessing. And whilst there are numerous instances in which we cannot, as in these, see the precise reason for the entail of mercy being cut off—though there are or may be instances in which, with the appearance or the consciousness of equal carefulness among the children of the same family, one is taken and another is left; yet let it rather be granted that human discernment fails, and that human consciousness is imperfect, than that God's promise is unreal. How often, in the history of a Christian's

experience, are there prayers to which he sees no answer. And how often does it baffle all the efforts of the nicest consciousness and the most painful scrutiny to tell what was the fatal element that mingled in certain of his supplications, and in what specific particular it was that others differed, so as to have had the power which belongs to the prayer of faith. And when we think how many influences there are that contribute to mould the character of a child—when we consider how unremitting the care and prayerfulness that are demanded from the earliest dawn of its susceptibility to external impressions—when we see how ready good men are to fail in the constant control that should be sustained over their words, and conduct, and dispositions, is it wonderful that somewhere, in the course of years, and amidst the various circumstances of domestic intercourse, there may have been in this one, and not in that other case, some fatal remissness, or some levity or inconsistency, at a moment so critical in the child's spiritual state as to have rendered it fatal, and yet which even the most nicely-exercised consciousness cannot trace?*

* The following remarks by Dr Bushnell of America are very important:—"Many persons seem never to have brought their minds down close enough to an infant child to understand that anything of consequence is going on within it, until after it has come to language and become a subject thus of *instruction*. As if a child were to learn a language before it is capable of learning anything! Whereas there is a whole era, so to speak, before language, which may be called the era of *impressions*; and these impressions are the seminal principles, in some sense, of the activity that runs to language, and also of the

“Where is the parent,” says an American writer, “whose children have turned aside from God, whose heart will not rather reproach him, than charge God with forgetting his promise?” *

whole future character. I strongly suspect that more is done, in the age previous to language, to affect the character of children, or when they are waiting in indolent security, by nurses and attendants, than in all the instruction and discipline of their minority afterwards; for in this first age—the age of impressions—there goes out in the whole manner of the parent, the look, the voice, the handling, an expression of feeling, and that feeling expressed streams directly into the soul, and reproduces itself there as by a law of contagion. What man of adult age, who is at all observant of himself, has failed to notice the power that lies in a simple *presence*, even to him? To this power the infant is passive as wax to the seal. When, therefore, we consider how small a speck, falling into the nucleus of a crystal, may disturb its form, or how the smallest mite of foreign matter present in the quickening egg will suffice to produce a deformity; considering also, on the other hand, what nice conditions of repose in one case, and what accurately modulated supplies of heat in the other, are necessary to a perfect product, then only do we begin to imagine what work is going on in the soul of a child during the age of impression. . . . Now what I have endeavoured in my tract, and what I here endeavour, is to wake in our churches a sense of this power, and of the momentous responsibilities that accrue under it. I wish to produce an impression that God has not held us responsible for the effect only of what we do or teach, or for acts of control or government, but quite as much for the effect of our *being what we are*,—that there is a plastic age in the house, receiving its type, not from our words, but from our *spirit*, one whose character is shaping in the moulds of our own.”

* This sentence is taken from a very able and interesting article (to which we are also indebted for the extract in the preceding note) in the *Princeton Review*, which was transferred to the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* for December 1853. The writer does not fully adopt the views stated above, and yet he speaks of the divinely-instituted connexion between faithful parental training and the salvation of children; and says, “Our very want of faith in the promise is one great reason of our failure.” Yet the hesitation which

This view of the ordinance, therefore, completely satisfies all that is required by its being defined to be a seal; whilst, more than any other, it is fitted to impress parents with a solemn sense of their responsibility, and to encourage and animate them to diligence and prayer. It remains only to add, that it affords an easy and obvious solution of two questions which have sometimes been the occasion of difficulty. It distinctly indicates what children ought to be baptized; and it fixes their relation to the Church.

1. It implies that only those children are to be baptized who, by reason of the faith of one or both of their parents, are presumed to be within the covenant; or those who are so adopted by a believer, that he makes himself thoroughly respon-

the writer feels to admit the strict and proper idea of a covenant-engagement in these promises, betrays him into some inconsistency. After speaking very forcibly and justly of the conditions regarding the parents, he adds—"Then, again, there is a condition to be performed by the children themselves. God promises to be their God, but they must consent to be his people. He promises them his Spirit, but they must seek and cherish his influence. If they renounce his covenant, and refuse to have God for their God, and to walk in the way of his commandments, then the promise no longer pertains to them." We would not be surprised at this language in the mouth of an Arminian. But the promise, if it be a promise at all, is a promise of regenerating grace; and whenever that is bestowed, it effectually and irresistibly produces the consent to be His people—the gracious character and the obedient heart, which are all here represented as contingencies. The promise as stated by the writer does not recognise any peculiarity in the position of the children of covenant-keeping parents;—it is only the Gospel offer, as it is addressed universally to the children of men at large.

sible for their godly up-bringing, and surrounds them with the hallowing influences of a godly family. The directions given with regard to the rite of circumcision teach that these latter are to be regarded as heirs of the covenant blessing. For they who were to be the subjects of this rite were described as being not only "every man-child in your generation," but also "he that is born in thy house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed" (Gen. xvii. 12). Abraham's slaves were a portion of his "household," whom, equally with his children, he was to command to keep the way of the Lord (Gen. xviii. 18); and co-extensive with his responsibility was his encouragement, in the hope which he might cherish regarding them as regarding his own children. They had a permanent standing in his household similar to that of children, and therefore they also had a standing within the covenant—they enjoyed its privileges, they incurred its obligations.

2. It defines the relation of baptized children to the Church. They are to be regarded as, if not already the recipients, at least the heirs of grace.* If

* Calvinistic Baptists ought not to feel that difficulty which they so much urge, about the administration of an ordinance of the Church to unregenerated children, and about recognising, as in any sense members of the visible church, those who had made and could make no profession of belonging to the invisible: for Calvinists hold, that "the catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists in the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body,

there is no mistake as to the character of the parents, either as to their personal godliness or their parental fidelity, then, by reason of the parents' faith, the children are, and in baptism they are recognised as being, the heirs of covenant promise—those to whom there now pertain “the adoption, and the covenants, and the promises” (Rom. ix. 3). And if so, with what interest ought they to be looked on by the Church! Having recognised them as those who, so far as man can judge, will yet be manifested as the elect of God, with what affection ought she not to watch over them, with what diligence to train them, with what wholesome influence to surround their every path, with what constant prayerfulness to bear them before the mercy-seat, in the sure expectation of “the time appointed by the Father,” when they, though now “differing nothing from a servant,” and being under “tutors and governors,” shall receive “the adoption of sons.”

But, again, is this all? Is its operation merely external? Is its use exhausted in the objective sign and seal? Is it neither the source nor the channel of any spiritual virtue to the child? In the Lord's Supper, we see “Christ and the benefits of the new covenant” not only *represented* and *sealed*,

and the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”—*Westminster Confession*, xxv. i.

but also *applied to believers*. If infant baptism does not fulfil this threefold function, is it worthy of the name of a sacrament? Does it in this point, and in this point only, come short of a sacramental nature?

III. Let us then consider, in the third place, in what sense spiritual blessings are APPLIED to infants in baptism, or how infants derive from it any spiritual benefit.

1. As it is through their parents that they are interested in the covenant, and thus have a right to this sacrament, we may expect that, through their parents also, they obtain some benefit from it. The parents are the parties with whom, in the administration of the ordinance, God transacts, to whose faith he speaks both in the promise and the seal; and therefore it is reasonable to ask, do *they* receive no immediate spiritual benefit from its administration? In the Lord's Supper, the worthy receiver is "*by faith* made a partaker of Christ's body and blood, with all his benefits." He obtains the spiritual benefit not by any magical charm which the sacrament can work, nor by any virtue which the carnal elements contain or physically convey, but by his faith being quickened and strengthened through God's word and seal of promise being brought so close to him, and by it, as thus invigorated, largely deriving the blessings of salvation out of the fulness of Christ.* In infant baptism,

* "Wherefore are, then, sacraments and seals annexed, seeing we

the parent, and not the child, is the party who has that faith by which the effect of the sacrament is realised. It therefore becomes a means of grace, as it is the "visible word" of God's promise, which, coming with the power of the Spirit to the parent's eye and understanding and heart, quickens his faith in the covenant, his hope of the salvation of his child, his resolution to train the child for God, his diligence and fervour in parental care. Of the heavenly impulse then given—of the clearer view and firmer assurance which he, in the moment of his child's baptism, obtains of the well-ordered covenant, the parent never ceases to feel the influence; and the child experiences the blessed result in his early training, and consequently all the days of his life. If this fruit of baptism is not more frequently realised in the consciousness of God's people, is there not cause to fear that the defect may be traced to the inadequate preparation of the heart, with which too often even they present their offspring before the Lord, in their practically esteeming the ordinance as little higher than a solemn ceremony, in their failing to perceive and apprehend the

get na mair in the sacrament nor we get in the Word; and we get als meikle in the very simple Word as we get in the sacrament? . . . The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better grip of Christ nor we get in the simple Word—that we may possess Christ in our hearts and minds mair fully and largely nor we did before in the simple Word; that Christ might have a larger space to make residence in our narrow hearts nor he could have by the hearing of the simple Word; and to possess Christ mair fully it is a better thing."

—Robert Bruce *on the Sacraments*, p. 29.

voice of God in the seal of the covenant, or the real covenant nature of their own transaction with him?

2. As baptism does not infallibly mark the spiritual character of the children to whom it is administered, so neither do we know that it directly and immediately conveys divine grace to any one of them. If the principles already stated are correct, the doctrine of *baptismal regeneration* is, under all its modifications,* utterly destitute of scriptural authority. God may bestow his regenerating

* The Romish dogma, as propounded by the Council of Trent, is, "that a sacrament is a sensible thing, which, by the appointment of God, has the power both of *signifying* and of *effecting* (*efficiendae*) holiness and righteousness" (Catechism, part ii. c. 1, qu. 8). Others state it thus—that the regenerating grace is dispensed not by the sacrament, but invariably *along with* it. The most evangelical modification of the doctrine is—that the regenerating grace is dispensed at the moment of baptism only as the answer to believing prayer, and consequently only in those instances in which the infant has the benefit of one or more believing parents or sponsors. The regeneration is, in this case, not the *opus operatum*, the result of the mere priestly act, according to the bare Romish theory, but the *opus operantis*. And yet even this view, greatly as it seems to magnify the prayer of faith, contains this vitiating principle, that the prayer of faith is of no effect without the sacrament. It implies that God cannot impart the grace of regeneration (whatever be the measure of grace which they understand by this term)—that He must wait until it suit the convenience of a man, perhaps a worthless, ignorant, immoral priest, by administering the sacrament, to permit Him to do so. This man, if he cannot command, can at least hinder the descent of the Spirit till his own judgment or caprice consent. This is just the same hierarchical element, though not so grossly developed, as is involved in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Archdeacon Wilberforce adverts to this objection in his *Doctrine of Holy Baptism*, but he does not condescend to answer it. He combines it with another objection, and says, "This is to return to the ancient Gnostic error."—P. 34.

Spirit on an infant at the very moment of its baptism. We have no scriptural warrant to expect that He will do so. We have, perhaps, no ground for believing that He has ever, in any one instance, actually done so since the world began. In the accurate and careful language of our Confession of Faith—language of which the meaning is neither ambiguous nor difficult to be reconciled with Scripture, “the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time when it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s will, in his appointed time” (chap. xxviii. 6). The benefits derived from baptism are not exclusively intermediate through the parents, but are also direct. For afterwards, as understood and contemplated, it is a fit means by which the Holy Spirit may awaken gracious affections. Before conversion, how appropriate and pungent the appeals which may be derived from the parent’s prayers and faith, of which his presentation of his child in baptism was the evidence and pledge. In a season of conviction and anxious inquiry, how strong the encouragement which the promise sealed in baptism suggests, if there is reason to believe that it was indeed sealed to a godly parent. And when the transition from death to life has been effected, what

thankfulness and wonder must be excited when one can say, My baptism was “the *sign* and *seal* of my ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace.” Whatever blessings can be conveyed to children by the promise made to godly parents on their behalf, these very blessings, and none other, become, in God’s own time and way, the actual fruits of their baptism; and who can tell in what degree the actual realisation of these fruits is owing to their baptism having been believingly received by their parents, or solemnly and thankfully remembered by themselves?

But yet again, even this does not exhaust the meaning of the ordinance. In every covenant transaction there are mutual engagements, so that the sacraments, while called, on the one hand, seals of God’s grace to us, are also, on the other, called seals or pledges of our devotedness to Him. In the Lord’s Supper, the communicant not only professes faith in Christ, but also vows obedience to Him. Receiving from God the assurance of all-sufficient grace, reminded also of the greatness of redeeming love, he binds himself to God in a perpetual covenant, and promises, “All that the Lord hath said will we do and be obedient.”—(Exod. xxiv. 7.) In baptism, the parent, assured by God’s promise, and animated and subdued by

His overflowing love, solemnly engages to train up his child "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." And the child, which in this very act is recognised as the heir of promise, and for which the invaluable blessing of parental care is thus strictly secured, is itself, at the same time, brought under corresponding obligations. For,

IV. Baptism is also the solemn DEDICATION of the infant to God. It signifies and seals "our engagement to be the Lord's."

The consecration of the priests, the dedication of the temple, the presentation of its offerings, meant the setting of them apart for the Lord's service, the permanent surrender of them to be employed, not according to the will of man, nor for the common purposes of life, but according to the Lord's will, and for the service of His house. And the dedication of an individual soul to God must mean that he is recognised as no more his own, but that he becomes God's servant, God's property; * or "that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God" (1 Pet. iv. 2).

But it may be said, We understand how men may alienate their property from themselves and devote it to God's service, and how one can bind and devote himself to a life of obedience to the Lord; but is it consistent with the nature of spiritual religion that a man should incur the responsibility of

* 1 Cor. vi. 19, 20.

a dedication to which he did not consent, or that a parent can really impose such a weighty obligation on a yet unconscious infant? In answer to this it has only to be remembered that, in circumstances rendering their own consent impossible, God himself commanded that all the first-born of the families of Israel should be "sanctified," or set apart to His service, and that in the covenant of old He enjoined a similar consecration of Abraham's seed; and farther, that we recognise no impropriety in Hannah, without any special warrant from God at all, dedicating the infant Samuel unto the Lord, from the period of his birth, all the days of his life (1 Sam. i. 11, 28).*

In the baptismal dedication, there is the authority both of the parental relation and of the Divine warrant. Encouraged by this promise, and warranted by the covenant standing into which, through the exercise of gracious sovereignty, the child has already been advanced, the parent gladly acknowledges the Divine relationship and ratifies the claim. He brings his child before the Lord, saying—This thou gavest me, and in so far as I have any property in it, or authority over it, I give it unto thee, to be thy servant; be thou its God, accept of it, and make it thine, renew and consecrate

* "Even among heathens this law (the *jus parentis*) has been acknowledged, as appears from the well-known fact of the Carthaginian general, who took his son Hannibal, when only eight years old, to the altar, and swore him to eternal enmity against the Romans."
—Dr M'CRIE on *Christian Baptism*.

it with thy Holy Spirit; I hold it not back, but yield it wholly up to Thy Spirit's gracious operation. I surrender it to be sprinkled with atoning blood, and sanctified by the Holy Ghost, possessed and inhabited by thine own presence as a spiritual temple. And in testimony of the sincerity of this my dedication, I on my part undertake ever to regard it as *holy*,* carefully to protect it from the corruption that is in the world, remembering that "if any man defileth the temple of God, him shall God destroy," (1 Cor. iii. 17), and continually to surround it with those means and appliances through which the doors of the heart may be flung open, that the King of Glory may enter, and the consecration be consummated.

But more particularly, the Church is not a voluntary society, which men are equally free to enter or not as they choose. It is the kingdom of Him who has dominion over the hearts and consciences of all. Wherever the proclamation of His authority and of His redeeming love is made, men are laid under an instant and irrevocable obligation to bow before the sceptre of His grace. And just as by the very circumstance of our birth, our place as subjects of an earthly kingdom, and our position in this world's society, are fixed with all their corresponding obligations, so God may, by some act or circumstance, without our consent and previous to our consciousness, bind us over to be

* See 1 Cor. vii. 14.

members of His spiritual kingdom; and our first cognisance of the fact will in this case be our incurring the full responsibility of an actual obligation. Now, the family arrangement, with its important characteristics of parental authority and covenant privilege, presents one of the most appropriate provisions by which such an obligation can be imposed and the transmission of the kingdom secured from age to age. The very circumstance of being born and nurtured in a home where one is surrounded by Christian example and Christian influence constitutes an obligation. The anticipation of these influences, and the certainty of the blessing with which they are to be accompanied, might be sufficient warrant for the believing parent to dedicate his child to God from earliest infancy. But this is not left to the parent's discretion. For God, who makes his children at once the heirs of promise and the subjects of responsibility, requires this at his hand. Their baptism is therefore not an arbitrary act of will-worship on the parent's part, but his solemn recognition of the obligation which God has already imposed upon the child by including him within the covenant, while it is God's declaration of the parents' spiritual authority over their children, and spiritual identification with them. In the exercise of this authority, the parent, instead of leaving his children unfettered to choose or to reject the service of God, vows, like Abraham, to *command* them to keep the ways of the Lord.

And because of this identification, as having a consciousness of his own fidelity and an assured hope of God's promised grace, he is not chargeable with presumption when, in presenting his children at baptism, he solemnly declares, like Joshua, "As for me *and my house* we will serve the Lord."—(Jos. xxiv. 15.) The dedication is real, and warrantable, and righteous. The child may indeed refuse to recognise it—as a born subject may prove a traitor to his country, and the son of a prince may act unworthily of his lineage and his place. But if so, he is not blameless. And if, on the other hand, humbly recognising the fact of this dedication, he realises all that is secured for, as well as reflects on all that is required of him, he will gratefully exclaim, "O Lord, truly I am thy servant, the son of thine handmaid; thou hast loosed my bonds. I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem."—(Ps. cxvi. 16–19.)

Baptism is thus not an arbitrary, but a significant *badge of Christian discipleship*. It is not the mark simply of having adopted the name and the outward profession of Christian; but it is the symbol of all that Christianity, internally and spiritually, is. It is in the highest sense a badge and

symbol of Christian discipleship, because it is the *sign and seal* of a vital relationship to God, of a right and title to the enjoyment of saving mercy, and of a consecration to the holiness and obedience of the Christian life.

How abundantly precious, then, to the believing parent the sacrament in which his children are sealed with the sign of the covenant. But its observance is not merely a gracious privilege—it is also a matter of peremptory duty. Not that it is, in the highest and most absolute sense, necessary to eternal life. But still it is an imperative obligation. If there is great danger of unduly exalting the sacrament, as if the dispensation of grace were tied to it, there is also no little danger of unduly depreciating and disesteeming it. God never separates between privilege and duty. When He sets before us gospel salvation, He not merely invites, he commands us to accept of it. And when He institutes an ordinance for the strengthening of his people's faith, and the testifying of their love to him, he not merely permits, but enjoins them to avail themselves of it. As in the case of the Lord's Supper, the undue and improper observance of baptism He resents as a profanation. But that it be worthily observed is not a matter of indifference. He does not allow it to be neglected or despised with impunity. A parent is not guiltless of this neglect, because, being an unbeliever,

he forbears to profane it. He has, indeed, no right to the seal of a promise which he does not believe ; but his very unbelief is itself a contempt of the ordinance, and of all that it teaches and promises. And a parent who claims for his children the inheritance of promise, and neglects or disesteems the sacrament, both sets at nought the authority by which it was appointed, and undervalues, if not the grace which is sealed, at least the graciousness which provided the seal. The one occupies the position of the heathen, who, being a stranger to the covenant and the ordinances of promise, was without God and without hope in the world. But the other can be likened only to the Israelite who wilfully neglected the rite of circumcision, and against whom the sentence was, " That soul shall be cut off from his people, for he hath broken my covenant."—(Gen. xvii. 14.)

But, once more, precious as baptism is to the children of covenant-keeping parents, of what advantage or significance is it to those whose parents have not faithfully nurtured them, still more to those whose parents are ungodly, and who, in the baptism of their infant children, made no acceptable approach to God, but only profaned his ordinance by ignorance, unbelief, or levity? In all these cases no promise was sealed, no spiritual blessing promised. Was, then, the sacrament a mere nullity to the children, bearing to them no message,

and leaving on them no impress? No, by no means. "What if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?"—(Rom. iii. 3.) Though, through the parents' sin, it in such cases sealed no promise, and may have been the means of no blessing, yet it was the appointed act of solemn dedication to the service of God; and the impress and seal of this dedication cannot be so easily erased. Though the parent had no such intention, and was destitute of the faith without which he could not please God, yet still the sign of dedication, the solemn oath of God, has been received. And if the man who "eats and drinks unworthily" at the Lord's table is nevertheless held to have taken upon him all the vows of a Christian profession, and to subject himself to the charge of covenant breaking, by the sin, or unbelief, or apostasy of his future life—so, in like manner, the child who has, in any circumstances, been baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," is really bound over and dedicated to the service of the Lord; and if he withhold his heart and his life from the Saviour, he is guilty of breaking the seal of solemn dedication, and sacrilegiously despoiling the temple of its offering. To what extent, in such a case, ignorance, inadvertence, want of opportunity, or defects of education, may extenuate the guilt, or how the load of guilt is to be distributed, we do not undertake to say. But the guilt of

thoughtlessly presenting an offering to the Lord does not nullify the obligation which the act implies, nor atone for the crime of wilfully withdrawing what has thus been consecrated. In personating God's people, and wilfully intruding into their sacramental standing, unbelieving parents do not acquire their privileges, but they take upon themselves their responsibilities.

Nor, again, let it be replied, It is unjust to hold such a dedication valid, when the subject was unconscious and unconsenting, and when no blessings have been sealed and secured. For, 1. consent is not a necessary condition of obligation. Indeed, our weightiest obligations to God are antecedent to, and irrespective of, our consent. How great our responsibility for the offer of salvation; and yet the work of salvation has been accomplished, and the offer of it is made without our consent; and the unwillingness of a sinner to hear the Gospel invitation does not diminish his guilt in rejecting it. Nay, our obligations to God as the God of creation and providence are coeval with our being, and antecedent to the possibility of our consent. We are therefore not at liberty to renounce our baptismal dedication, or to choose to whom we will dedicate ourselves, except on a principle which would involve that we must "needs go out of the world."

2. With as little truth can it be alleged, that such a dedication is oppressive, discouraging, unjust, be-

cause it only binds down on its subject the heavy burden of obligation, and offers no blessing, conveys no promise. For even in such a case baptism has a voice of mercy as well as a voice of command. Let a man, under whatever disadvantages he may have been nurtured, and in whatever circumstances he may now be placed, make use of his baptism aright—learn the lessons which it teaches, and perform the part which it prescribes—and he will not fail of realising, in all their fulness, the promises which it is designed to seal. And if the dedication by which in baptism he was bound over to God's service impel or stimulate him to this, it will be proved not to have been in vain.

THE END.







